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ABSTRACT

This collection contains four papers that describe action research projects in different settings. The first paper, "Action Research: An Approach Called DATA-DATA," by John M. Peters, is a guide to action research for practitioners. The DATA-DATA model integrates features of reflective practice and formal research methodology. The model, suited to first-, second-, and third-person research, has been tested by more than a dozen researchers. It asks the researcher to Describe, analyze, theorize, and act (DATA) in two research phases. The second paper, "Collaborative Learning in a Community College Information Technology Class," by Martha Merrill, describes the use of the DATA-DATA model to guide inquiry into the researcher's own practice in teaching information technology. The third paper, "Collaborative Learning in the Counselor/Student Relationship," by Mark Cotter describes a study of the relationship between students and a counselor as they jointly constructed knowledge about their college experiences. The final paper, "Professional Development and Evaluation through Collaboration," by Betty B. Ragland, is a study of the use of the DATA-DATA model in action research on the teacher evaluation process as conducted by an assistant principal. Each paper contains references. (SLD)

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# COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH IN THREE SETTINGS:
## COMMUNITY COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

ACTION RESEARCH: AN APROACH CALLED DATA-DATA
John M. Peters
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Martha Merrill
Pellissippi State Community College

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE COUNSELOR/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP
Mark Cotter
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

FOSTERING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION THROUGH COLLABORATION
Betty B. Ragland
Mountain View Youth Development Center

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association
Chattanooga, TN, November 2002

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**Action Research: An Approach Called DATA-DATA**

*John M. Peters*
*University of Tennessee*
*U.S.A.*

*This paper is about action research and a particular way of doing it. It is written for practitioners who need a guide for doing a kind of inquiry that was once considered to be the exclusive domain of the academic and academies. It is also for academics who have broadened their concept of knowing, including how knowledge is constructed and whose knowledge it is. The author's model of action research is described and discussed in terms of how it integrates features of reflective practice and formal research methodology. Called DATA-DATA, the model is suited to first, second and third person research (Torbert, 2001), and it has been tested in a variety of practice settings by more than a dozen action researchers.*

**Introduction**

For centuries research was assumed to be the exclusive domain of academics who lived in the noble seclusion of the universities or in the protected labs of large corporations. However, during the last half-century, and especially in the most recent decade, a relatively new form of inquiry called *action research* has been adopted by increasing numbers of mainly non-academics. Examples can be found in business enterprises, primary schools, law offices, community agencies, private consulting firms, museums, community colleges and technical institutes, and in universities. What researchers in these diverse places have in common is a concern for knowing more about their practices and how they can be improved. However, non-academics have found themselves in new and sometimes conflicting roles as practitioners and researchers, especially when they approach their work as researchers in the generally accepted understanding of that role. From the conventional researcher's point of view, there are aspects of the dual practitioner-researcher role that pose what amounts to a conflict of interest when practitioners are the subjects of their own inquiries. This situation calls for an approach to doing action research that positions practitioners as legitimate subjects of their inquiries, for there is no logical way to separate them from their own practices. The following is a discussion of this dilemma and one way to conduct action research such that the potential conflict is lessened or eliminated.

**The New Researchers**

The growth in action research reflects a change in the perception of how knowledge is created and who creates it. In a sense, this change is no change at all, as people in the ordinary business of life nearly always create ways to go on in their lives, sometimes in

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spite of the help provided by experts. The change is also a result of an increasingly better informed and confident practitioner community and a growing belief in the capacity of people everywhere to create knowledge that not only has utility in their own lives but in other lives as well (Horton and Freire, 1990). Easier and more widespread access to information via the Internet and print sources has certainly enhanced our ability to do research, and literature that addresses the phenomenon is growing up around it. Non-academics are elbowing their way into journals and other printed and virtual outlets so that they can share their ideas and research results alongside academics who are comfortable in such places. However, for most practitioners, doing action research remains an unfamiliar way of knowing. Even for those of us who regularly do action research, there is much about it that needs to be better understood.

One issue in action research was introduced above – how practitioners can serve as the subject of their own research. Another is how action research is similar to and different from informal, reflective practice. Reflective practice is now widely accepted as a desirable and effective way of doing work. However, not all reflective practitioners do action research, even though they may be closer to it than they think. By most definitions, action research involves some form of reflective practice (Quigley and Kuhne, 1997), and reflective practitioners certainly think about what they do as they practice, so it is clear that these two concerns are interrelated. I have prefaced the description of my approach to doing action research with a discussion of how action research is related to reflective practice.

**Reflective Practice and Action Research**

Reflective practice is sometimes thought to be what someone does after they act, introspectively and alone, in "mindful consideration of one's actions" (Osterman, 1990, p.134). However, reflective practice is more than simply thinking about what one is doing and what one should do next. Reflective practice "*involves identifying one's assumptions and feelings associated with practice, theorizing about how these assumptions and feelings are functionally or dysfunctionally associated with practice, and acting on the basis of the resulting theory of practice*" (Peters, 1991, p.89).

Donald Schon (1983), whose seminal writing in the area informed my own and many others' concept of reflective practice, defined it this way:

> When someone reflects-in-action, he (sic) becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry (p.68).

For Shon, theory is a part of the equation, but theory is not necessarily from the outside of the practitioner and his or her practice; rather, it is primarily the practitioner's own theory that drives his or her actions. I agree that reflective practice is an informal inquiry into one's practice, driven by the practitioner's practical theory and practice context. It was and still is, for me, what practitioners do to inquire into their practice without necessarily invoking the aid of systematic and formal research procedures. However, the threads that connect action research to reflective practice can be easily tied together to make action research a more formal and systematic version of reflective practice. Here is how I define action research: *Action research is a systematic and critical study of their work by individual practitioners, groups or organizations, the aim being to revise their practical theories in the light of these findings plus the context of their practice, and to act on subsequently revised theories in the interest of improving their practices.*

Certain features of this definition of action research stand in contrast to my definition of reflective practice. In both, practical theorizing is involved, as is the notion that action is tied to one's practical theory. However, my concept of reflective practice was built around individual practice, whereas, at some level, action research usually involves other people. For example, Marshall and Reason (1994) identified the following three aims of action research that involve three different audiences:

> All good research is *for me, for us*, and *for them*: It speaks to three audiences...It is *for them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes...It is *for us* to the extent that it responds to concerns for our praxis, is relevant and timely...(for) those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is *for me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world (112-113).

Torbert (2001) presented a similar distinction in goals and audience in what he called first, second, and third-person dimensions of inquiry. First person research address the researcher's own life. In second person research, the researcher engages with others in some form of joint inquiry into their mutual interests. Heron and Reason's (2001) co-operative inquiry is an example of second person action research. Third person research aims at developing the capacity to do first or second person inquiry by wider communities and groups. The work of Gustavsen (Toulmin and Gustavsen,1996) is an example of this type of action research

So, action research isn't limited to what a lone practitioner can do, if it is indeed possible for a practitioner to be entirely alone in his or her actions. Doing research with people, and not on people, is the hallmark of participatory action research (McTaggart, 1991). In fact, this emphasis on "withness" rather than on "aboutness" is what an increasing number of action researchers consider to be distinctive of action research in general – resulting in a more collaborative, cooperative form of inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2001).

My definition of action research also adds the element of context, inclusive of the situation in which theorizing is done and further action is undertaken. It is impossible to separate action research from the context that helps shape one's action, no matter how

cogent the practical theory of the researcher(s). Although there is a sense in which actors can not fully know the background of their actions as they occur (Shotter, 1998), it seems possible and smart to take background into consideration in any formulation of a practical theory.

These three features of reflective practice and action research – practical theorizing, context, systematic inquiry – join a fourth feature that ties the whole enterprise to the practitioner or the group doing the research. This is examined next.

**The Researcher as Subject**

In conventional research that is largely framed by a positivistic worldview, we have learned to distance ourselves from the reality that we seek to understand, to objectivize it, and to seek a way to generalize to other situations similar to the one we better understand. Such a stance suggests that researchers are not involved with the subjects of their inquiries. Even in some so-called qualitative inquiry, researchers often seek the participation of other researchers in the analysis of their data, so that their own views are perceived as being kept apart from the analysis. In the social sciences, this is research *on* people. It is as if the reality of people's lives is already there, fixed, determined, patterned, awaiting the discovery of the researcher. It is also as if the researcher isn't a part of this reality.

This viewpoint frequently carries over into action research. The result is often a conflict between the researcher's worldview and their everyday reality. It is ironic that those who wish to understand better what they do in their practice would attempt to take themselves out of that practice and its context. Clearly, this is impossible, but the influence of the positivistic way of thinking should not be underestimated. Most of us came to embrace that viewpoint after years of schooling, and some of us have reinforced that view by engaging in conventional research. It is extremely difficult to let go of that view and to do research as an involved subject of one's own inquiry. If the question is how we can remain "objective" and be personally involved. The answer is that we can't, so we need to get on with studying what we do and finding ways to help others understand the worthiness of what is accomplished by doing action research. Bradbury and Reason (2001), for example, address issues of validity and quality of action research in a recent publication intended to open such issues for discussion among action researchers and critics alike.

The inclusion of the researcher as subject is the fourth element of action research that is embedded in the model described in the following section of this paper. The model will only be described here, but examples of its applications will be discussed in companion papers prepared by other researchers and presented at this conference.

**DATA-DATA**

The DATA-DATA model of action research was developed to guide my action research and that of other researchers who would find it helpful in their own practices. The model consists of eight cyclic phases of action and reflection leading to a plan for designing and conducting an action research event. Each phase of the model corresponds to a letter in

the acronym: In the first part of DATA-DATA, D = Describe, A = Analyze, T = Theorize, A = Act. In the second part, D = Design, A = Analyze, T= Theorize, and A= Act. The first DATA essentially represents *reflective practice*; the second DATA represents the methodological aspects of research and the occasional necessity of revising one's practical theory in the light of findings. More than a dozen practitioners, representing a variety of practical settings, have used this model. They contributed significantly to the model's integrity and usefulness, and I am indebted to all of them.

The reader should keep in mind the following features of my discussion of DATA-DATA. First, for ease of presentation I sometimes use the term "researcher" to represent individuals or groups, and the model is intended to serve first, second and third person research. Second, I discuss the phases as if the information provided in each phase might be written in the form of a proposal and subsequent written report. Third, the phases are cyclic and can be repeated as many times as needed. While the model has a linear aspect in it, the phases usually do not occur only once and in sequential order. They should be considered as moving in a back and forth manner, especially in terms of the first DATA.

The first DATA phases are as follows:

**D = *Describe***. In this phase, researchers lay out the area in which they seek a change in their practices and the situation in which their practices occur. The essential question to be asked in this phase is a What? question; i.e., "What is my experience with my practice in the situation in which I practice? No attempt is made to judge the experience or the situation or to reason why either exists in its current form. This will occur in the next phase.

For researchers to describe their situations with as little assessment as possible, it is recommended that they take a phenomenological stance toward the situation (A good discussion of phenomenological stance can be found in Pollio, Henley, and Thompson, 1997). The goal of this phase is to obtain a rich description of the practice situation and to use this description as background for the phases to follow. In the later stages of the research event, this background will likely be described differently, especially if the researchers' actions result in a change in their practice. The phenomenological approach ought to help keep at bay the researchers' presuppositions and judgments regarding the problem, issues, opportunities, or other interpretations of the situation that can lead to a premature decision to approach the research event one way or another. The idea is to base such decisions on a fully developed description before moving on to later research tasks. It is very easy to jump to a conclusion about what "the problem" is at this point. After all, we have learned that research is based in problems, and we must have one, or so it seems (Quigley and Kuhne, 1997). A problem is what the problem solver says it is (Winograd, 1980), so the researcher is in the driver's seat when it comes to naming the problem. Researchers need to be patient and seek first to understand the situation that describes their practice. Again, there will be ample opportunity to identify a problem, if any, later in the process.

It is also sometimes helpful to enlist the assistance of a colleague at this phase. Ask them to ask you a simple question: "What stands out for you in regard to (your choice of) aspect of your practice?" They need to stay out of your description otherwise, and to merely prompt you to go on with your response, so you will be able to give the richest possible description of your practice. ( See Kvale, 1983, for help with this kind of "interview").

A = ***Analyze***. In this phase, researchers examine their assumptions about the situation and reasons they attach to the way they practice in the situation. The essential question is a Why? question; e.g., "Why am I experiencing my practice in this manner?", or "Why is the situation as I am experiencing it?" The why question gives the researchers an opportunity to more fully explore their practices, their concerns, doubts, interests, ideas and feelings about the practices and thus lay the groundwork for how they will seek to change it, if they decide to do so.

The Analyze phase is often done as an elongated version of the Describe phase; however, that usually occurs when the describe phase is laden with justifications and accounts, or the Analyze phase is a mere extension of Describe without a revelation of the researchers' assumptions and reasons. The phenomenological approach can be extended to this phase, as someone asking open-ended questions can prompt a researcher to reveal reasons associated with his or her actions, just as surely as open questions can prompt a rich description of the practice. Keep in mind that reasons given are not usually causative in nature; that is, they aren't the cause of what researchers do in practice but they are instead associations the researchers make with their actions. Thus, reasons can provide researchers with an even richer understanding of their practices. They can also provide the basis for identifying the researchers' practical theory of some aspect of that practice.

It is in this phase that researchers are able to tentatively identify the problem, issue, or initiative that will serve as the focus of their change effort. By this time in the process, researchers will likely have gone through several versions of such a focus, but the model is designed for that likelihood. In effect, the first two phases of the model force researchers into a back and forth reflective mode, hopefully in the interest of producing a more satisfying answer to the question, "What is going on and why?"

T= ***Theorize***. Here researchers lay out the approach they will take to make a change in their practices. This is an expression of their practical theories of aspects of the practices they wish to change, and their theories might be augmented by consideration of formal theories and/or the other researchers' theories that are assumed to have special relevancy to the practical situations. The essential questions to ask here are both What? and Why? questions; i.e., "What am I going to do (about the problem or issue, or to take the particular initiative identified above), and Why this way and not other possibilities?"

This "solution" to what is constructed in the first two phases is the thing to be studied from this point forward in the process. What will happen later is a sort of test of the researchers' practical theories, and it is in this sense that the process begins to look like conventional research. However, even though the researchers' practical theory of what

will work is quite possibly informed by an understanding of formal theory, it is not the latter that is being tested – at least not the only aspect of their theory being tested.

**A = *Act*.** This is the phase in which researchers identify what they wish to know about their theories. The essential question is a What? question: "What do I wish to find out about what I plan to do?" The answer to this question will identify some aspects of the theories and not others, for practical reasons and in terms of what the researchers are most interested in finding out. Again, this phase resembles plans for other kinds of research, as those plans often involve stating research questions or hypotheses that will be addressed or tested in a study. (It should be noted that researchers have a choice to make at this phase. Just as the first DATA represents reflective practice, researcher-practitioners are presented with at least three options at this stage: They can (1) decide not to put their plans into action, for any number of reasons; (2) put their theories into play, without the intent to study it in any systematic manner; or (3) put their theories into play with the intent to study it as a form of action research. The first two are usually what happens in the daily world of reflective practitioners; the third option represents one of the differences in reflective practice and action research.)

If the researchers' choice is to act on their theories in a formal, systematic way, their research questions are identified and the next DATA is begun. The *second DATA* phases are as follows:

**D = *Design*.** In this phase, researchers select the procedures for collecting and analyzing data. The essential question is a How? question; i.e., "How will I study my research questions?" A range of design options are available for consideration by researchers, including, e.g., a case study design, surveys, experimental designs, ethnographic strategies, phenomenological studies, and others. Data analysis options include both qualitative and quantitative procedures and more. In short, all of the methodological options available to researchers doing other kinds of research are available to action researchers. The task faced by any researcher is to choose the design and procedures appropriate for the research questions asked and the type of data being collected.

**A = *Analyze*.** This is the phase in which data are analyzed. The procedures for analyzing data are usually specified in advance of this phase, along with the design decisions and according to the assumptions of statistical tools that may be selected in advance. The essential question here is a "What?" question; i.e., "What do the results say in response to the research questions?" The response, or findings, are simply presented at this point, and the interpretation of findings is made in the phase that follows.

**T = *Theorize*.** Here researchers interpret the findings in terms of their theories developed in the first DATA. The essential question is a "What?" question, as "What do the findings mean in terms of my theory of practice?" It is also against the background of the researchers' practice provided in Describe and Analyze phases of the first DATA that theory is re-approached and considered anew in light of the study's findings. The background is part of the context of the researchers' theory, then and now, so it is likely

that they will better understand the background as a result of re-theorizing their practice. Thus, the whole of the researchers' practices ought to be made clearer by such research, and parts of their practical theory should be sharpened by their findings.

**A** = ***Act***. This is the action step in which researchers turn back to their practices and go on in terms of what they have learned from reflecting on their revised theories. This is the major cycle change in DATA; if the researchers have come this far, they are at a juncture of having learned, reflected, and now going on with their practice better informed, perhaps a little more skilled, and changed to some extent as researchers of their practices.

**Conclusion**

The DATA-DATA model is meant to serve as a guide to doing action research. It is inclusive of features of reflective practice, and it provides for the extension of this informal process into the practitioner's choice of more formal and systematic modes of inquiry. What the model does for practitioners is to give them a structure for planning and conducting their research. It also engages them in a back and forth way of knowing in their practice. This way of doing action research forces practitioners to include themselves in their research, as they will be unable to escape the strongly reflective pull of the first few stages of the process. Their practical theory and self-knowledge will be better for the experience.

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**Collaborative Learning in a Community College**
**Information Technology Class**

Martha Merrill
Pellissippi State Community College

This paper describes the inquiry I made into my practice as a community college professor of information technology. The model of action research that guided my inquiry was the DATA-DATA model (Peters, 1997) as described below:

**DATA I**

- **Describe**: provide a description of the area of the practice on which the practitioner hopes to improve and the practitioner's role in it
- **Analyze**: identify the underlying assumptions that have contributed to the present area of the proposed initiative and proposed strategy and the reason for having interest
- **Theorize**: derive a practical theory for addressing issues of interest and examine these in light of the formal theories behind the practice, the practical theories guiding what actually is done, and the questions that guide inquiry into action
- **Act**: put informed practical theories into actions

**DATA II**

- **Design**: establish a guiding methodology and procedures for collecting information
- **Analyze**: critically reflect on and analyze information
- **Theorize**: refine the practical theory
- **Act**: initiate the methodology as part of the practice, modify it, or possibly reject it, depending on what is learned and inquire into this action.

The first four phases (the first DATA) of the DATA-DATA framework guided me through an exploration of my practice, its history and theoretical background, an area of concern in my practice, formulating a practical theory about how to inquire into my practice, and deciding to formally inquire into my practice. The second four phases (the second DATA) served as a guide for designing my research, collecting data, analyzing data, discovering themes/results, and reflecting on the implications of my findings.

**Problem Statement**

The educational background of information technology instructors is often steeped in business education teaching techniques. Business educators have been traditionally taught that the "describe, demonstrate, and do" method of teaching is the tried and true way to develop computer skills. The traditional format for teaching computer skills is often limited to: Describe the feature or function, demonstrate the feature, have students practice the feature, move to the next feature, and so on. Although this "describe, demonstrate, do" approach to teaching incorporates a seminal adult

learning principle—that adults learn by doing—it assumes the role of learner as passive recipient of information rather than active participant in learning.

This approach to teaching is typical of the first of the three Teaching-Learning types, Type I, identified by Peters & Armstrong (1998). Peters & Armstrong's three Teaching-Learning types describe the relationships between teachers and learners in a learning environment. Type I Teaching-Learning, described as "teaching by transmission, learning by reception" (Peters & Armstrong, 1998, p. 78), positions the teacher as the knowledge caretaker who imparts "knowledge" to learners. A Type I teacher makes the decisions about what is to be learned, how it is to be learned, and how learning is to be assessed. The information flow is generally unidirectional and the relationship is between teacher and learners.

However, when I taught using a Type I approach, I felt like I was performing. I had my "lecture" notes, my handouts, my multimedia presentations, and my topics for discussion, but the ideas and concepts were the ones that I thought were important, the learning tasks were the ones that I thought would help students learn, and the tests assessed what I thought the students should have learned. During my performance, I was limiting students' learning to what I thought was important to them. Didn't the students have some experience and knowledge to share? Didn't they have ideas about what they needed to know to succeed in their practices? Why was I teaching like I alone held the key to knowledge about computer applications?

I wanted to see and hear what the students wanted to learn, to understand with them how they learned and how they wanted to learn, to relate to them in a new way, to determine how to "go on" (Shotter, 1998) with them in learning experiences. Type III Teaching-Learning (Peters & Armstrong, 1998) seemed to offer the learning experiences that would help me get what I wanted. Type III Teaching-Learning involves a new kind of relationship between teacher and learners; the relationship becomes "defined in terms of learner to learner, learner to group, and group to learner" (Peters & Armstrong, p. 79). The teacher is no longer the caretaker of knowledge, but assumes the role of co-constructor of knowledge within a community of learners. Knowledge is created as learners (now including the teacher) learn from each other and learn from the group. All learners in the group share responsibility for what is to be learned, how it is to be learned, and how learning is to be assessed. As learners work together to create knowledge, the nature of the relationship between teacher, learner, and group changes. What each learner contributes to the learning experience becomes a part of the other learners' knowledge as well as a part of the group's knowledge, and the group's knowledge becomes part of the individual learner's knowledge. This co-construction of new knowledge in the redefined teacher-learner-group relationships of Type III Teaching-Learning is collaborative learning. I decided to facilitate and engage in collaborative learning with students to see what stood out for us about this type of learning.

## Methodology

### Qualitative research

Using action research to inquire into a new way of Teaching-Learning in my practice afforded me the opportunity to conduct first person research limited to my course and class members. Action research allowed me to immerse myself in my practice rather than distance myself from what I wanted to study; it integrated action, inquiry, and

reflection. Immersing myself in my practice and engaging in cycles of action-reflection-action held the most promise for my gaining understanding and knowledge about my practice as I facilitated and engaged in collaborative learning with students.

**Participants:**

Participants in the study were twelve students who were enrolled in an upper level (sophomore) information technology course during the spring semester of 2002. This course was designed for students to learn how to use spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel) in a business setting. I asked all twelve students to participate in the study and they agreed.

**Procedure:**

I used three qualitative data collection techniques: phenomenological/semi-structured interviews, field notes, and researcher journaling. The purpose for using three data gathering techniques was to ensure that I would have wide-ranging and sufficient data to provide a rich description of our experience of collaborative learning.

Phenomenological/Semi-Structured Interviews. Two phenomenological/semi-structured interviews with each student were planned; the first was to occur at midterm (week 8) of the semester and the second at the end of the semester (during weeks 15 or 16). The first of the two interviews was conducted during the month of March 2002 with 12 of 12 enrolled students. The second interview with eight of the nine remaining students (two students dropped all classes after midterm and another was critically injured during week thirteen of class) occurred during the first week of May 2002. My office was the site of all twenty interviews. With the permission of the participants, I audiotaped all interviews. Participants were encouraged to talk openly about their experiences with the collaborative learning they experienced in class. The initial phenomenological question was: "What stood out for you about your experiences in our class this semester?" Phenomenological interviewing was used because it is a mode of inquiry "sensitive enough to articulate the nuances of human experience and reflection" (Pollio, Thompson, & Henley, 1997. p. vii). The guided follow-up questions were probing and open-ended to encourage a rich description of what it was like to be a participant in a class in which collaborative learning/Type III Teaching-Learning was utilized.

During each of the twenty interviews, to minimize the "schmooze effect" or lessen the power differential between us (I was the teacher with power to determine grades), I asked the students to help me learn to be a researcher as they interviewed. I asked them to be totally candid in voicing their experience of the course. Although I cannot say for certain that this request was honored, I did capture this statement from one of the interviewees: "If I think it, I say it" and this statement from another, "I tell you exactly what I'm thinking." The twenty interviews were transcribed as protocols.

Field Notes. I planned to reserve an hour immediately following each class to record field notes, but did not succeed after each class; some field notes were recorded the next day. Field notes were more descriptive than analytical, listing excerpts of dialogue, observations of participants, and other information that seemed significant after class. I used field notes to obtain a rich description of both familiar and strange occurrences and utterances. The field notes were supplemented by listening to audiotapes of the class and were typed as protocols. A total of 25 sets of field notes, with sets ranging from one to fourteen pages, were analyzed for this study.

Researcher Journal Entries. I recorded journal entries, from January until May 2002, of my thoughts, reactions, and reflections about what it was like to implement collaborative learning/Type III Teaching-Learning. Journal entries included some analysis of what was happening with me and with students. I moved beyond mere description to reflecting on the questions that arose from the description itself: Why did I think this occurred? What prompted this statement? How did we get from here to there? Could I have done something differently to nurture that feeling? What did I learn from the experience? The journal became "a place for ideas, reflections, hunches, and notes about patterns that seemed to be emerging" (Glesne, 1999, p. 49). Journal entries were speculative and reflective and provided data concerning the process of implementing collaborative learning. Thirty journal entries, ranging from one to six pages, were analyzed for this study.

**Data Analysis:**

An inductive qualitative data analysis, as outlined by Spradley (1980) and later expanded by Hatch (2002), began when I completed the phenomenological/semi-structured interviews. The first step in analyzing the data was to read the data and determine the frames of analysis I would use. My social constructionist leanings led me to look for verbal exchanges/interactions (where social construction occurs) in the interview protocols and field notes and to look for reflections in the journal entries; these became my frames of analysis. I reread the data using these frames and created domains based on the semantic relationships I noted. Domains are categories of meaning; they include three elements (Spadley, 1980): a cover term, included terms, and a semantic relationship. "The cover term is the name for a cultural domain...The included terms are the names for all the smaller categories inside the domain...The third element in all cultural domains is a single semantic relationship, the linking together of two categories" (Spradley, p. 89). I used Spradley's nine semantic relationships to identify how "included terms" and "cover terms" were related in the data. I emerged from this reading with eighteen salient domains. I conducted an analysis within domains, analyzing each domain for additional ways to organize its included terms. Several of the domains with the highest number of included terms offered up sub-domains. I saw connections between the eighteen domains and identified themes or patterns in the data. I emerged with three major themes, each a feature of collaborative learning that stood out for me and students involved in this study.

## Results

The three features of collaborative learning that stood out for us during this study were relationships, roles, and mindfulness. These features contributed to the creation of a learning environment conducive to collaborative learning, Type III Teaching-Learning. I offer here a quick look at each of these themes.

**Relationships**

"Collaborative learning is born and nurtured in relationships." I wrote these words after my first semester in the Collaborative Learning program at the University of Tennessee. The data collected during this study bears out that claim. Learning together collaboratively started in getting to know each other as co-constructors of knowledge. To get comfortable with each other required the creation of a comfortable atmosphere or environment in which to explore ideas. These two subcategories speak to the importance of building relationships in collaborative learning. I use here data displays from

interviews, field notes, and journal entries to explore how relationships contributed to our collaborative learning experiences.

Getting to Know Each Other. The first day with new students in a new class is important in establishing good teacher/student and student/student relationships. The first day I asked the students to make a list of fifteen things that they were or that represented them. Most of their lists reflected relationships (mother, son, wife, aunt, etc.) and positions (hotel manager, stay at home mom, grocery store bookkeeper, etc.) and hobbies/interests (woodworking, gardening, playing volleyball, etc.). I asked each student to share some of the things they written about themselves. Though awkward at first, the students loosened up after the first two students shared their interests. I talked with each student about what they'd said and encouraged the rest of the class to do likewise. Soon students were asking questions of students and we spent the entire class getting to know each other. The first student I interviewed for this study, Kristi, a transit company dispatcher in her mid-twenties, commented that, ***"another thing that stands out is how close we are. And I think that was thanks to you because you took that first whole day and kind of...had us introduce ourselves and interact with each other."*** Earlier in the interview, she'd said, ***"Like that first day, you made a point to try to learn everyone's name and, you know, most people don't even do that on the first day."*** She pointed to these actions as a sign of my genuine interest in them as persons, not just as students to be taught. I continued to take every opportunity to get to know students better; this was reflected in the following journal entry, ***"I continue to arrive for class early so I can talk with students out in the hall. I am very conscious of the role of relationships in the good feeling I have about the way class has gone this semester. The students are responsive, open to new experiences, good-natured, and seem to be very comfortable in class."***

Also of importance was negotiating together how to act in the classroom as a way of getting to know each other. A class discussion about learning revealed that students negotiate or figure out how to act as a student in a classroom on the first day of class. Susan, a grocery store bookkeeper in her mid twenties, attributed this to the teacher, ***"It depends on the teacher. If the teacher is open and relaxed, you relax and come to your natural state a lot quicker than if the teacher is rigid."*** She concluded that, ***"If this person [the teacher] laughs at my jokes, it's OK to be funny as a student, and if this person gives me a dirty look when I say something when I wasn't asked, then I learn not to talk."*** So the teacher's actions toward students as early as the first day helped students negotiate what being a student means in that class. As I reflected on how I should approach the students the first day of class, I decided that getting to know them better was the first step in building relationships.

Closely related to taking a genuine interest in each other in the class was a third way to get to know students--asking them what they thought about issues in the classroom. Asking for student thinking on issues right off the bat was one way of, as Kelly, a fulltime student in her late twenties, said, ***"showing you want our opinion and that makes us feel very important. It goes back to the whole caring thing and that's important that you want input from the class, not just getting input, but that we're giving input, too."*** To learn together we had to take a genuine interest in what others had to say and get to know them as people who were members of many communities, not just as a person playing the role of student in my class.

Creating a comfortable environment for each other. Building and maintaining relationships that value acceptance, respect, openness, and shared responsibility for each other were important in creating a comfortable "space" or environment conducive to collaborative learning. Acceptance came with showing "the utmost respect for everyone in the group and for everything that is said by anyone in the group" (Peters & Armstrong, 1998, p. 83). Holding "the ideas expressed, the inquiries made, and the feelings shared" (p. 83) by everyone in the group in positive regard began to build the acceptance and trust necessary to feel comfortable with each other. We discussed how demonstrating the type of safe and respectful environment that we wanted played into how we related to each other. Kristi compared our relationships to friendship. She shared her story of learning for two years as a cohort with a group of people and how close they became. ***"For the whole two years, we had a kind of friendship. And I've gotten that from this class already, just from the few short weeks we've been in there."*** Other students described the comfortable relationships as an "aura" or "atmosphere" or "very comfortable learning spot." The unconditional respect shown by the group toward each other provided the incentive to be open and accepting of the multiplicity of voices that we all brought "to the table." Our ages ranged from 19 to 49; we represented 3 nationalities; we worked part time or full time or we were fulltime students; we were 9 females and 3 males. Nancy, a part time student and working mother in her early thirties, shared that ***"our class is very diverse, very diverse, and I think that helps things out."*** By recognizing and valuing the diversity, we were open to the possibility of learning new cultures, new ways of thinking and learning. Being open to new experiences freed us to ask questions of each other and explore new ways of, as Wittgenstein (1980) might say, knowing how to "go on" together as co-learners taking responsibility for each other's learning. Kristi described the shared responsibility for helping each other learn, ***"most of the time, I'm watching everybody else to see how they do...I think we all try to help each other."*** Another student quote is a good example of the level of acceptance, respect, openness, and shared responsibility that the group felt. ***"As far as our dialogue in there, it's interesting that people are willing to give...a very personal side of themselves...but, I mean, we felt very comfortable. You know it's one thing to tell about our hobbies in there or what you did on the weekend, but another thing to talk about...a life-changing moment...I was willing to tell that to a lot of people in class and I never even told any of my friends, my best friend, or my mom or dad. I kept it to myself. And I realized, it hit me, that I was willing to go into this class with people I've only known for 9 weeks and that's how comfortable I felt with them."*** If indeed collaborative learning is born and nurtured in relationships in a comfortable learning environment, then we were ready to explore that new way of learning together in a relationship characterized by Gail, a former factory worker in her mid-forties, as ***"like a little neighborhood or community where you know everybody."*** Next we explored our assumptions about the role of the teacher and the role of the student in collaborative learning.

**Roles of Participants in Collaborative Learning**

Through this action research project, I discovered that the role I played in collaborative learning was very different from a traditional teacher role. Rather than the "gatekeeper" of knowledge who creates opportunities for students to learn what I think they should know, I became a co-constructor of knowledge. As I positioned myself as a co-constructor, or co-learner with the students, I noticed that we had to create a new role

for students in a new learning environment. We had to collaboratively decide, as Davies and Harre (2001) suggest, how to "position" ourselves in relation to each other in our new roles. These new teacher and student roles were the second feature that stood out for us.

Teacher Role. I found the teacher role in collaborative learning to be challenging but exciting. Two categories related to the teacher role emerged from the data: (1) preparing to teach and (2) sharing responsibility for learning. In preparing to teach using collaborative learning, I found two subcategories: (1) fears and (2) reflecting. A discussion of these subcategories will be followed by a discussion of shared responsibility for learning.

Preparing to teach in a Type III/collaborative learning environment had many things in common with traditional "prepping" for class: reading textbook materials, researching course-related materials, creating handouts, thinking about what worked in the past, designing learning activities, and assessing student work. However, taking the role of knowledge constructor versus knowledge giver required adjustments that I had not anticipated. I found myself filled with fears. The fears ranged from nervousness about being unable to explain or model collaborative learning concepts—***"I kept thinking that if I didn't have a great topic for dialogue and I couldn't explain it [dialogue] well enough that I would ruin their [the students'] experience of CL"***—to wondering what the outcomes of collaborative learning might be—***"how can I expect college sophomores to jump in and dialogue the first time we look at it and try to do it?"*** The data pointed also to a fear of the unknown in the classroom. Several times in journal entries, I wrote about feeling unprepared, no matter how much I prepared. I worked hard to overcome the fear of losing control and to embrace the unknown; this is evident in the following quote from my journaling:

> ***One last thing that seems to be evident to me as I plan for CL experiences is that I have to be extremely prepared for class, more so than if I am in a Type I or Type II teaching environment. In Type I, I can control what we learn and how we learn it and, in Type II, I can control some of the direction of the learning by my group assignments. In Type III, it's wide open spaces. We could have gone anywhere today. The thought crossed my mind early on in our exploration, 'What if I don't know the answer if we get stuck?' and then I thought, 'Well, what of it if I don't?' We are learning from each other and one of us will know the answer or how to find out the answer. So all the preparation was worth that feeling of freedom from being the 'keeper of the knowledge.' The knowledge is out there between us, not in my head. I have co-constructors out there.***

Later in the study, I wrote of the unknown, ***"I am really enjoying, to borrow from John et al., 'making the road by walking' with this group."*** The fear diminished as I learned to give up control of where our learning took us.

Another subcategory under preparing to teach was the increased amount of reflection involved. Journal entries were by nature reflective, but for every hour spent journaling, I spent many more thinking about what to do next class, how to improve my facilitation skills, where we might wind up in our dialogue, and when to use Type I or Type II teaching to introduce new Excel concepts. At one point, I wrote, ***"I feel like I'm thinking about this group all the time—in the shower, in other classes, in meetings, at***

***night—I can't get what we're experiencing off my mind."*** Near constant reflection characterized my preparing to teach using collaborative learning.

The second category under Teacher Role was sharing responsibility for teaching and learning. Teachers in a traditional teaching role bear responsibility for student learning. In our experience of collaborative learning, I (the teacher) faded into the background as a co-constructor of knowledge, participating as a fellow learner within the group; I acted as facilitator, especially at first when the group was learning how to learn collaboratively, but less so as the group became more comfortable with the new teacher and student roles we created. In my new role as co-constructor, I shared the responsibility for teaching and learning with students. We all became responsible for each other and for the group's learning. The fear of ***"not knowing the answer"*** disappeared; it was acceptable not to know. Another indication of shared responsibility was voiced by Kristi in her interview, ***"we all try to help each other learn."*** She became my "learning barometer" by watching other students to see if they were understanding and then "playing dumb" to ask about the concepts others were not understanding. Planning learning activities, assignments, due dates, and assessment strategies became the responsibility of the group. We learned together how to learn Excel and then implemented our plan.

Student Role. The two themes to emerge from the data on the student role in collaborative learning closely paralleled those of the teacher role: (1) preparing to learn and (2) sharing responsibility for teaching and learning. Students adapted to their new role slowly, but gradually learned to appreciate their newfound freedom and control.

For students, preparing to learn collaboratively involved examining our assumptions about being a student and embracing less structure. As a learning experience, I asked students to write about a critical incident, a "peak" learning experience, or as one student called it, a "wow" learning experience--one that made them think, "this is what learning is all about." As we practiced dialogue, we talked about the assumptions about how students were "supposed to act" in our "peak" experiences. Susan characterized the traditional student role, typical of Type I Teaching-Learning, in her interview, ***"You sit back and you listen and then you do... And you don't really have that much, that much of an active role... You just come in, sit down, and listen to the lecture and you apply the application, the lecture to the problem and then you turn it in and you get a grade and then you're tested on, on the material that, you know, it's like you're a sponge so the teacher has you soak up all the knowledge and then she squeezes it back out of you for the test."***

In the collaborative learning environment, we found that the student role changed. The students learned that they were co-constructors of knowledge, that they shared responsibility for learning together, and that they had an interest in helping others learn. In talking about the location for, in her terms, ***"the primary knowledge base,"*** Debra, a fulltime student and tutor, said ***"In Type III, it wasn't a leader per se, it [the primary knowledge base] would jump from person to person."*** Jodi echoed this, ***"the student role in this class is not just learning but also teaching."*** The student role changed to give the group the power to make decisions about how we learned together, about assignments, and about assessments. This required embracing a less structured course. The syllabus and our own learning needs served as a guide for the content of our course and we controlled how we learned that content. We planned together how to learn Excel

and put our plan into action as a group until one student reported that she ***"felt comfortable outside the [traditional] student role."***

The role of teacher and of student changed in the collaborative learning environment. Preparing to teach and preparing to learn required a hard look at our assumptions about what it meant to be a teacher or to be a student. The traditional roles didn't meet our needs in our new learning environment and we collaboratively tried new roles for both teacher and student.

**Mindfulness**

As we built relationships, we created a comfortable learning environment for each other, collaboratively negotiated new teacher and student roles, and shared responsibility for teaching and learning, we cultivated a new awareness of how many things we needed to look for, to pay attention to, to be mindful of as we learned together. Mindfulness, as I use it here, means awareness of, acknowledgment of, and respect for the culture and circumstances in which a group finds itself. It means attending to the events, "utterances" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.67), and processes that occur in a collaborative learning environment as well as attending to the relationships which nurture collaborative learning. It can also mean holding in mind an attribute or event or person--the acknowledgement of a situation, condition, way of being, way of knowing, or way of relating.

As facilitator, I was particularly aware of the many things of which I should be mindful. This is evidenced in the following quote from my journal. ***"I always think of things I could have said differently or ways I could have acted differently that might have made the experience better somehow, maybe. I need to get better at reflection in action. Reflecting on things as they happen or are said and then reacting in ways that keep the dialogue going even when it is a new and scary concept to some students, honor the students' thoughts and contributions to 'X,' help me keep up with how we got from there to here, respect what each student brings to the learning experience, make sure that everyone is comfortable and engaged or connecting in the experience, keep myself in check re: being a co-constructor and sharing responsibility for all that's going on, and keep myself alert for/listening for striking moments and assumptions. It's hard to keep all that in mind while I'm in the experience, in the moment. There's so much to be mindful of."***

Students were also aware of the role of mindfulness in collaborative learning. Students reported that it was important to "***keep in mind***" activities such as "***listening to be influenced***," "***reflecting on what is happening here***," "***making sure everyone gets to hear everyone's voice***," "***looking for perspectives***," "***noticing different ways to learn,***" "***correcting misconceptions as you go,***" "***paying attention to what is going on and reacting to it,***" and "***making sure we understood by asking why we assumed stuff like that.***" Many students reported that they were mindful of our new roles and our new ways of relating in class. As Debra said, "***I was the teacher and the student.***" James reported that, during collaborative learning experiences, I was more like a "***mediator.***" Joyce characterized the position I took as "***more of a guide, not a leader.***" Bob described our positioning ourselves as co-learners as "***putting everybody on the same level.***"

Students were mindful of the shared responsibility for helping others learn, "***When I saw that [student name] wasn't getting it, I knew we had to talk more so he would. That's when I suggested we back up and try it again***" and for the direction that our learning activities took, "***We all decided to experiment with things and actually go***

***out and explore things without pressure."*** Students were also mindful that collaborative learning worked best when everyone contributed, "***so far, everybody has contributed,***" and "***everybody benefits from everybody else's comments.***" Kelly summed up the value of co-constructing with others what we wanted to learn and how we wanted to learn it, "***if you listen to just one person, the world would be a very, very, boring place. Maybe that one person is good and right, but maybe they're not.***"

## DISCUSSION

As I concluded this action research study, I was struck by how much I learned about my practice as a teacher and as a facilitator of collaborative learning. Researching myself through systematic data collection and inductive data analysis offered the answer to my research question: what features of collaborative learning would stand out for me and students enrolled in an information technology course? Three themes emerged as most notable in our collaborative learning experiences—relationships, roles, and mindfulness. The themes that emerged from the data speak to the importance of social interactions and mindfulness in the construction of knowledge.

### Relationships

The findings of this collaborative action research bear witness to the importance of relationships in collaborative learning. When asked what stood out for us in our learning experiences together, students were quick to point to characteristics of relationship such as closeness, friendship, trusting, open, flexible, non-threatening, or fun. Collaborative learning is dependent on the social interactions in relationships where the free and flowing exchange of ideas can occur. This study indicates that safety, trust, respect, and openness were the factors that helped to create the relationships that developed into what Katz (2001) characterized as "a community of resourceful learners" and Shotter (2000) described as, "resourceful or mutually enabling communities." It is within relationships that a sense of community is created.

Looking through a social constructionist lens, relationships are, as Peters and Armstrong (1998) suggest, "vital to the process of collaborative learning," the co-construction of shared meaning or knowledge. It is out of relationships that "we develop meaning, rationalities, the sense of value, moral interest, motivation, and so on" (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p.10). Relating responsibly in ways that "sustain and support the process of constructing meaning as opposed to terminating it"(McNamee & Gergen, p. xi) became a focal point in this study. Practicing relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen) meant being present to each other and to the group and realizing that our actions and dialogue influenced others in the group. Relational responsibility "lies within the shared attempt to sustain the conditions in which we can join in the construction of meaning" (Gergen, 2001, p. xi). Being present meant to be aware, to fully experience, to become engaged in the construction of meaning and knowledge that was occurring within the relationships forged in the group.

Relationships were integral to making a space for each other to openly and safely explore others' perspectives through dialogue. The relationships we developed in our sixteen weeks together grew into and out of a dialogical space, a space where we, as co-constructors of knowledge, were welcomed and welcoming, respected and respectful, trusted and trusting, and encouraged and encouraging. Through mindfulness of what nurtures those relationships and what makes a space conducive to joint action and

exploration, we created a dialogical space that opened up "new possibilities, new ways of going on with others not before thought possible—because of the fixed ways in which they had previously been imagined. By everyone involved voicing what matters to them, and by exchanging their different views on each others' concerns, all become engaged in the process of making meaning together" (Katz et al., 2000, p. 851).

If "meaningful language is generated within processes of relationship" (Gergen, 2001, p. xi), then relating in ways that sustain the dialogue is crucial to creating a dialogical space. Relating in ways that sustain dialogue meant respectfully acknowledging the thinking, feeling, or actions of others—letting others know that they have been heard—through verbal response or, perhaps, just listening.

The relationships we developed in and through collaborative learning and collaborative action research led to what Shotter (2002) calls relationally-responsive knowing or participatory knowledge. Instead of responding to course content as dead material, we gave it life through "participating intimately with the others...around us, as we dialogically unfold between us, intricately intertwined relationships of many, uniquely different kinds" (p. 4).

Collaborative action research with my students confirmed for us the value and importance of relationships and relating responsibly—not only in our classroom research about collaborative learning, but also in our learning how to research ourselves together. Implications for my practice are that, if I wish to engage in collaborative learning with students, my first step should be to develop relationships with them based on trust, openness, and safety.

Roles and Positioning

In this study, building relationships and acting in relationally responsible ways was critical in developing the trust and openness that allowed us to explore our assumptions about teacher and student roles. As facilitator of collaborative learning, I took on a very different role than that of a traditional teacher using a Type I teaching approach. I positioned myself in relation to the students as a facilitator first and then moved in and out into the position of co-constructor. I worked to create a space that invited dialogue by shifting between participating and observing; I was mindful of my responsibility as facilitator to create a dialogical space, but also mindful that collaborative learning occurs when all participants are seen as co-constructors of knowledge.

This shifting of position influenced my way of relating and speaking in the group. One of Bohm's three conditions necessary for dialogue is that "all participants must regard one another as colleagues" (Bohm as cited by Senge, 1990, p.243). As I created a space for dialogue for us, I was mindful of how the students perceived my role. In order to reduce the power imbalance between teacher and student (real and/or perceived), I positioned myself as fellow learner (co-constructor of knowledge) rather than as 'expert' or caretaker of knowledge; I honored each student's contribution and encouraged the others to do the same. According to Davies and Harre, "once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned" (2001, p.3). Because we position each other and ourselves by what we say and how we act, I spoke and acted into the role/position of facilitator and co-constructor, rather than

teacher, in the creation of new ways of speaking, relating, and acting in our fixed roles of teacher and student positioned as co-constructors of knowledge.

Why did roles and positioning stand out for us over the course of the semester? My practical theory was, because our positioning was so radically different from the norm, students were interested in how the teacher/student relationship would work. Students repeatedly compared the way I was with them to other teachers, calling traditional teachers "**dictatorial.**" After we had shared responsibility for teaching and learning in a collaborative learning environment, having little input in other classes became more noticeable to students.

As we experimented with different ways to learn together, we created new roles for ourselves. We reflected on how we might suspend our assumptions about how teachers and students should relate. As dialogic actions occurred, our group reflection on those actions helped to identify ways of relating more genuinely, and made more explicit our way of being together in the classroom and how that way of being influenced our learning. As we learned to reflect on our way of being (our practices), as we watched and called attention to the way that roles and relationships and interactions shaped our learning, we learned more about how we learn (metalearning) and constructed together a new way of relating to each other and a new way of learning together. Our new roles called for shared responsibility for each other's learning and this required a new way of thinking.

Mindfulness

"A change in the way of thinking is required to engage in collaborative learning" (Bruffee, 1993, p. x). Bruffee was referring to a change in epistemology; he contends that collaborative learning requires an acknowledgment that knowledge is socially constructed. After conducting this action research, I would offer an addendum to Bruffee's contention. Collaborative learning does indeed require a change of thinking, but I would suggest that mindfulness is also required. Mindfulness, as I use it here, means awareness of, acknowledgment of, and respect for the culture and circumstances in which a group finds itself. It means attending to the events, "utterances" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.67), and processes that occur in a collaborative learning environment as well as attending to the relationships which nurture collaborative learning. It can also mean holding in mind an attribute or event or person--the acknowledgement of a situation, condition, way of being, way of knowing, or way of relating.

Mindfulness could be characterized as Shotter's (1993) "knowing of the third kind." Shotter defines three ways of knowing—knowing *that,* knowing *how*, and knowing *from within.* Knowing *that* is essentially what Heron and Reason (2000) call *propositional knowing*—knowing concepts or facts, "through ideas and theories" (p. 183). Knowing *how* is what Heron and Reason (2000) call *practical knowing—practical knowing* is knowing "how to do something and is expressed in a skill, knack, or competence" (p. 183). Shotter's third way of knowing, knowing *from within*, is about mindfulness—the awareness of, the acknowledgement of, and the respect for the culture, circumstances, and the relationships in which new meaning is being made.

Why did mindfulness stand out for us after engaging in collaborative learning? As I facilitated our collaborative learning experiences, I talked about all the things of which we should be mindful as we created a new way to learn how to learn software applications. Many of these things I listed in my journal entry quoted above. We reflected

on our new practices as co-constructors of knowledge and identified many things that required awareness or mindfulness. We became mindful of trying to remember processes, act and react in relationally responsive ways, taking an intentional, dialogical stance (Shotter & Katz, 1996, p. 214) toward each other, exploring assumptions and others' perspectives, seeing connections between course content and different ways of learning and knowing, working to create new knowledge—things we generally did not attend to in a classroom setting. Trying to keep so many things in mind as we acted from and into the group became important in creating a collaborative learning environment.

Mindfulness was an important tool for us in discovering how to "go on" with each other in our new ways of relating and acting. Shotter explains that, "we must acquire certain sensibilities and attunements, one must come to know one's 'way about' (Wittgenstein, 1953, no. 123) *inside* the requisite, conversationally sustained 'reality' or 'inner world'. To do this, we must learn how to see what is around us 'in depth', as offering us a 'space of possibilities' for our actions. Such a sense only emerges for us from within our dialogically or chiasmically-structured *meetings* with the others around us. (2002, p. 7). Through mindfulness, we came to know our "way about" the relationships and roles that collaborative learning called out from us.

Collaborative action research provided a means for me to inquire into my practice with "a community of resourceful learners." Twelve remarkable students participated with me in creating collaborative learning opportunities and in researching myself as a teacher and facilitator. I learned many things from these students and from this research. Through dialogue and reflection, relationships and roles, mindfulness and a new way of thinking, we explored our new practices as co-constructors, our assumptions, and different ways of teaching, learning, and knowing. Experiencing a fresh way to teach/learn with students gave me cause to reflect on the "old ways" of teaching and learning and examine my assumptions about both. To "appreciate that which differs…from our taken-for-granted commonplaces is to generate the possibility of change and/or renewal" (Gergen, 1999, p. 101). I carry the possibility with me as I embark on new teaching and learning adventures with new students each semester.

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# Collaborative Learning in the Counselor/Student Relationship

**Mark Cotter**
**University of Tennessee**
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**Abstract**

The goal of the practitioner-researcher was to move beyond an information-gathering role with students to a dialogical relationship in which the counselor and student jointly construct knowledge. Nine students participated in the first semester of the study that spanned two semesters of counseling sessions. The counselor initiated a phenomenological interview as part of the intake process for students applying to the federal TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program. The interview was followed by a dialogue with students during the first semester, and a second round interviews was held in the second semester. A change in procedure from the first to the second semester was found to enhance the conversational qualities sought by the counselor. A qualitative analysis showed that three elements of dialogue helped to define the idealized conversation: (1) speech that carries its own momentum; (2) playing with concepts; and (3) the use of images and metaphor. Phenomenological interviewing was found to help counselor and student develop rich conversations while preserving their respective roles.

*To reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves. We build a wall between inner truth and outer performance, and we play-act the teacher's part. Our words, spoken at remove from our hearts, become 'the balloon speech in cartoons,' and we become caricatures of ourselves. We distance ourselves from students and subject to minimize the danger—forgetting that distance makes life more dangerous still by isolating the self. (Palmer, 1998, p. 17)*

What follows is the logical progression of ideas in a framework that details how I came to make informed changes in my practice. The practice I speak of is that of a counselor in a federal Student Support Services program in a state university. I sought to make changes and, for the purposes of this paper, to examine those changes using the progression of thought following the DATA model proposed by John Peters (Peters, 1991) and later expanded to the DATA-DATA model (Peters, 1997) as follows:

**DATA I**

- **Describe**: provide a description of the area of the practice on which the practitioner hopes to improve and the practitioner's role in it
- **Analyze**: identify the underlying assumptions that have contributed to the present area of the proposed initiative and proposed strategy and the reason for having interest
- **Theorize**: derive a practical theory for addressing issues of interest and examine these in light of the formal theories behind the practice, the practical theories guiding what actually is done, and the questions that guide inquiry into action
- **Act**: put informed practical theories into actions

**DATA II**

- **Design**: establish a guiding methodology and procedures for collecting information
- **Analyze**: critically reflect on and analyze information
- **Theorize**: refine the practical theory
- **Act**: initiate the methodology as part of the practice, modify it, or possibly reject it, depending on what is learned and inquire into this action.

The structure of a DATA-DATA approach is reflected in the work that is to follow. DATA I is seen in the exploration of the practice, its historical roots and philosophies, and the ways of negotiating practice at the institutional and counselor level. This first stage (DATA I) is the "preparation work" for the research portion of action research—the results of this are reflected as the problem statement that follows. DATA II spells out the way I have chosen to inquire into that practice. I choose this design because it establishes the links connecting the researcher's philosophical stance, the established theories of the practice, the process of decision-making, and the learning that takes place.

## Problem Statement

The nature of the counselor/student relationship suggests that the student with the problem is the one who must change the way he she or she goes about the business of learning. Few people would doubt, however, that the counselor also learns something new with each new student. Through pride or confidence in our own abilities, counselors tend to resist the urge to let students "manipulate" us--to make us change the way we operate. After all, the student is the one with the problem, not me. What I had proposed was to make phenomenological interviews a part of the intake process for new student to the federal program as a means to develop a more "genuine" relationship to the student and to provide for mutual learning. Once instituted I wanted to look into what was going on within the information gathering process and compare what I found to the values I had forth for myself.

## Methodology

### Qualitative research

The relation to others would suggest a methodology that generates multiplicity. Gergen and Gergen (1999) speak of methodologies that go beyond the phenomenological or narrative analysis methods. They give the term, multivoiced research, to a type of research where the researcher injects his or her own experiences, along with voices from disparate vantage points, into the narrative to construct a richer account. Beyond the multivoiced methodology is collaborative research – more specifically, a kind of participatory action research--where the researcher enters into the culture of another group to help them research into their own problems to affect some sort of change. A combination of these two types of methods would seem to be what would best answer the question of what goes on within my own practice. I seek both to illuminate the culture of this unique form of helping-profession and to take action to improve upon it.

The choice of any methodology is driven by the questions to be answered. In this project, there were several questions. I wanted to know first of all what is going on in the phenomenological interview that makes it so appealing to me. I also wanted to know what is going on when we engage in these dialogical exchanges—these *conversations in the zone*. I define conversations in the zone as a type of dialogue (espoused by Martin Buber {1970} and highlighted by Hans Gadamer {1976}) that is responsive to the other, unreflected, and free-flowing. To find answers to these questions I reflected on the conversations by listening to the tapes and by scrutinizing the transcripts, in effect by standing back and looking at what we had done as an athlete might review his or her performance on tape after the contest.

### Participants:

Participants in this study were undergraduate students who were applying to the Student Support Services (SSS) program. I chose to ask the first three, first-generation college students who came during the spring semester of 1999 and the first eight from the summer semester to participate in the study. All eleven participants agreed without reservation, although two students could not make the second meeting due to work and illness and were not included in the study. First-generation status for federal eligibility is determined by the student's indication on the application that neither parent had graduated from a four-year college or university: however, for this study, in the intake interview I verified that neither parent had completed a two-year college. I chose these

additional criteria because I felt that the effect of first-generation status was more apparent in those students whose parents had no college or had not completed any college program (Cotter, 1999).

The students who participate in the SSS generally are seeking academic assistance such as academic advising, tutors, special sections of math and science, or academic counseling. The SSS advertises and conducts workshops during summer orientation, and we receive referrals through advising centers, the Black Cultural Center, and the Office of Disability Services; however, like the majority of students in our program, participants heard about the program through friends or classmates who were already involved in the program

**Procedure:**

The overall plan for the study was to have three sets of interviews and conversations during the summer semester of 2000, analyze the transcripts, form a practical theory, and make revisions for the fall semester—in essence to repeat the DATA II. After the summer semester I decided to change the nature of the questions and, consequently, the form of the follow-up conversation. The reasons for this change will be discussed in the results section. In the fall semester six more students participated. The initial phenomenological interview remained as it was in the summer.

The initial interview focuses on questions about the participant's experiences of college and follows the format described earlier for eliciting further exploration of the experience. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes in length. After the interview, I went with the participant to the front desk and made an appointment with the participant to return to the office to have a conversation about what the experience was like for both of us.

In the summer session, I suggested that we would be interviewing each other—I would ask some questions of the participant, and I expected the participant to ask me about what I thought or question why I wanted to know certain things. In the fall sessions, I had said at the end of the first interview that we would both have an assignment of thinking of three things that stood out for us from our experience. At the beginning of our conversations I asked whether the participant would like to go first.

I usually began the conversation by asking the participants what stood out for them. In contrast to the phenomenological interview, I responded with my own impressions and invited questions from the participant. The conversations lasted from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. Analyses of the taped interviews began with my listening to the tapes of the conversations and transcribing the tapes into a typed protocol.

The results of this study were evidenced by several factors. The phenomenological interview process was gauged by illumination of elements of the experience and the way these elements make sense within the whole of the experience. In this sense, the application of a phenomenological interview was judged to be useful to my practice if the second interview illuminated elements of the counselor /student relationship that made sense to both of us and revealed an enlightening experience. It was important, then, to look at what areas stood out for both of us.

I am mindful that good conversation--in what I call the *zone*—supports a topic, concept, or experience held between people and outside of their individual thoughts and opinions. I looked for evidence of this in the ways we play with creative thoughts with others—in particular, I looked for:

- narratives set out as analogues,
- descriptors of experiences,
- invitations into dialogue,
- expansion or magnification of concepts, or
- *hitchhiking* off of concepts.

I also made note of what stood out for me in the overall tone and rhythm of the conversation and the flow of the stream of thought. The *zone* is the term I employ for the kind of dialogue that is carried along by the momentum of the topics. It is spontaneous and unreflected conversation.

**Results**

The portion of the paper that follows begins with results from the summer semester. Since I tried a different approach in the follow-up conversations between summer and fall semesters, I chose to present the results found on the nature of the dialogues presented as separate sections to make the effect of the change more evident. When actual portions of dialogue are included in the results, passages preceded by "M" represent my voice, whereas passages preceded by other initials represent the other participants.

Summer semester:

Follow-up interviews began with my asking participants what stood out for them from their contact so far with the program. Before the conversations, I told participants they were free to ask me questions; in reviewing the transcripts, however, I noted that I responded more from what I consider to be invitations from the participant to give my viewpoint rather than to direct questions. Participants' responses were several contiguous sentences with occasional use of narrative examples within the exchanges.

One goal of the conversations was to stimulate dialogue that was free-flowing and spontaneous—in the zone. The transition from one speaker to the other was punctuated by a series of narrative illustrations, expansion of concepts, addition of details, reflection of comments, and invitations to respond (these transitions are noted in italics between responses).

There were several *sets* of these transactions—a *set* being comprised of continual responses connected by transitions--covering topics of cultural differences in communication, stereotyping, dialogue, college finances, and perceptions of different colleges. The change from topic to topic occurred from a break in the concentration — usually when one members stopped to interpret the experience-- or from a more *natural* side trip as when a mention of some topic stimulated some other recollection.

The conversation was animated and obviously interesting—seeming to take on its own momentum. The focus, however, was on topic areas other than the actual experience of the previous interview, not on our shared experience. Not surprisingly, the direction of the conversation, with some exceptions, seemed to be toward the life space of the student.

Subsequent conversations seemed to follow the style of a phenomenological interview rather than of a conversation. With the first participant, there were seven identifiable sets of free-flowing dialogue. In my exchange with the second participant, there were only two short sets, and with the third participant, there were three. I felt that

the onus was on me to ask questions of the student. I could identify very few instances when students overtly questioned me.

After reviewing the summer's conversations, I decided to change the way in which participants and I transitioned from the first interview to the conversation that was to follow and, by doing so, possibly change the expectations for the conversations. At the end of the initial phenomenological intake interview, I suggested to the participant that we both come back to the next meeting with an assignment: We each would think of three things that stood out for from our first contacts and report back to each other when we met again.

Fall semester:

Six students participated in the follow-up conversations during the fall semester. When we came together for the conversation, I gave the participant the option of opening the conversation with the three things that stood out for him or her, or of letting me go first. Four of the six participants chose to go first. There was a noticeable change in the rhythm and pace of the conversations and in the topics that were addressed from the conversations in the summer semester. The exchanges were more rapid-fire. Often we would be finishing each other's thoughts or talk over each other with the same thought.

The conversations had much more momentum with these participants. The "playing with concepts"—or sets, as I have called them-- had a longer duration with fewer prompts on my part. I noted more invitations to respond and more questions coming from the participant, and the questions I asked came more from my own curiosity than from a desire to keep the conversation going. Topics that were suspended between us in this conversational *zone* ventured into areas that addressed the initial questions of the study.

In several instances, participants made reference to a new awareness they gained from the intake interview. The awareness was not of a new fact but of a way of looking at things. As in Wittgenstein's model, we were not hunting out new facts but were trying to describe something that was in plain view.

This process of conversation as a way of interacting with students stood out in contrast to other experiences, along the lines of personal versus impersonal, small versus big, humor versus dry, and comfortable versus cold. The perception of the program in general as more personal and intimate was paired with a belief that the participant was likely to return. The utility of the phenomenological interview stood out for the participants as well, as when one student described the intake interview as a therapeutic encounter.

The general climate of the office also seems to serve as a background that is perceived to be supportive of the student. This hearkens back to the open environment conducive to dialogue—the container Isaacs (1993) mentions. Student workers (the "friendly group of people") especially stood out as a positive part of the experience. Participants indicated expectations of returning to the Student Support Services program because of the interaction. The words of one participant serve as a fitting summary of the conversations:

B: No, I just think, uh, I hope to do well here. I hope to get that tutor that I'm supposed to get on Monday, and if I have any questions, I hope that I can just come back here and talk to you.

M: That's what we want.

B: I'm looking forward to it. I believe in the interaction.
M: Mm hmm.
B: As opposed to, "Well, you may get one." and "I don't know what I'm going to get." So I'm just trying to say I'm here, and hopefully, I expect you to be here, too.

Results from the fall semester differed from those of the summer in the quality and the content of the conversations, but the way that the participants interpreted experiences through assumptions was common to both sessions and can be discussed as such.

The results of the conversations, like hard numerical data in quantitative studies, make little sense in and of themselves. In action research, the action taken depends on the sense that the practitioner makes of the experience. This sense-making was guided in this instance by critically reflecting on the words and the presence of the others against the backdrop of the practical day-to-day workings of my practice. In the next section I will revisit the experience and discuss how the experience fit in with the practical and formal theories set out earlier. I will also discuss some findings that were not anticipated in the design.

**Discussion**

The data obtained from the interviews was supportive of the decision to use phenomenological interviews as part of my practice. There is more in this process, though, than a way of asking questions—there is an intentional stance taken toward the other. Vygotsky (1952) contributed heavily to my practice in making me aware of the ways we all can learn through mediation by another. A counselor in my position is the mediator between a student and the culture in which the student finds herself or himself. I have the power by virtue of my role (as defined by my profession and recognized by the student) to lend meaning to the student's experience. As my critical reflection in DATA I indicated, however, I am not entirely comfortable with that role.

The impression from the summer conversations provided some mixed results. I was pleased with the overall tone of the exchange, which was highlighted by laughter and insight. There was also some evidence of the defining features of conversation in the *zone* throughout the dialogues. Though enlightening in many respects, these first conversations were not of the quality of a sustained dialogue that I had hoped for, and they were not as focused on those areas of my practice in which I had questions. I did not believe that the plan of using a two-way phenomenological interview was effective in leading to this kind of interaction. The student did not ask questions of me that would have given them more control over the direction of the conversation. What stood out was what I perceived to be maintenance of the power difference between us and a reluctance by students to move beyond the professional interviewing mode (as Kvale {1996} described it) to more philosophical conversation.

The change in the way I guided the transition between the initial intake interview and the follow-up conversation after the summer seems to have made a difference in the quality of that conversation. By placing emphasis on coming up with "three things" that stood out and by taking on equal responsibility for that task, the relative positions of counselor and student changed. It was no longer me-interviewing-the-participant, but

two people working together to construct knowledge. This difference in posture toward each other opened up avenues and topics that previously were blocked by social convention—a student does not normally give observations of a counselor's practice (at not with the counselor). We were now free to express experiences as we saw them. I was also better able to make use of the elements of good dialogue: we suspended thoughts and notions of authority, embraced polarization as a tool for seeing the concept, mediated each other, asked questions from a position of genuine not knowing, and granted each other the authority over our thoughts and feelings. The direction of our concentration went from what we were doing to the object of our doing. It was a bit like riding a bicycle—once you stop thinking about riding the bicycle and start concentrating on where you are going, you and the bicycle become a single unit. As with riding a bicycle, it is easier to not think about dialogue when it is done in a safe space. Although Isaacs (1993) describes the container as a safe place metaphorically, the actual container—the physical space in which the conversations took place—contributed to the discourse.

Several aspects of this experience with language warrant mentioning in light of the practical and formal theories set out earlier in this work. The nature of the conversations gave us access to types of knowledge that a problem-solving or expert analysis relationship could not have produced. The participants and I both learned from our engagement with each other and gained new understanding of what it means to be first-generation or second-generation college students. This was a kind of presentational knowledge--as Reason and Heron (1996) would assert--that came about through metaphor and images. The experience of creating these images and playing with them outside of our preconceived notions and judgments gave the knowledge depth and breadth that went beyond the descriptive or naming capacity of the words we used. It worked something like this: one of us planted the seed of a concept, offering it up to the other with an invitation to make something of it. As Shotter and Katz (1999) might describe the exchange, this verbal offering connected to some experience in the other and called out for a response. The response took the form of recognition of the concept. If the concept had an unclear form, the response might be a request to fill in more detail. If the concept "clicked" with the other, the response might be to add more detail. The concept floated back and forth between the participants like an airy sculpture taking on new shape and meaning as each participant contributed something from his or her vantage point. This is what I define as collaborative learning—the construction of knowledge in the "in between." It is an experience that must be lived to be understood fully, and it would be more clearly expressed (outside of living it) through the medium of art, another presentational way of knowing.

Collaborative learning of this sort occurs naturally between people but all too often is relegated to areas outside of the formal learning or business environment. Our professional roles are perceived as barriers to this more relaxed and playful type of relationship. The experience of using collaborative learning with first generation college students would tend to show otherwise. Students persistently deferred to me as the helping agent—the expert to whom they will come for advice and guidance. Within this role as expert, however, my position and the corresponding position of the student continually shifted along with the power held by each of us. Rom Harre (1995) illustrates how this occurred through the use of the images and metaphors set out in the

conversations. Each of us approaches the situation from positions based on past encounters. As the summer semester conversations demonstrated, this positioning was one of me as inquisitor. With a change in responsibilities—each of us having the same assignment—this positioning changed. The way of speaking within this new set of rules was altered for the occasion. Each of us was able to speak from fragments of our life experiences and to create narratives that—though possibly not historically accurate—served as metaphors for the way we each negotiate the world.

The proposition of this paper is that there is more to the role of the counselor than an individual dispensing the expertise of the system and changing the thinking of another. The approach to the student I wish to maintain assumes the relational responsibility I have to the student as a fellow human being. I do not propose responsibility in this sense as a taking of blame or credit for actions but rather as McNamee and Gergen (1999) describe responsibility--an acknowledgement that human contact has an effect. These conversations were intended to engender the human contact—to relate to another as more than a set of problems or a manipulable object of study. I structured the dialogues within the parameters set out by Isaacs (1993) to create a container wherein we could construct knowledge together. In doing so, we saw each other as sharing struggles in the educational system, viewing the ways in which we felt apart from the dominant culture, caring about the same issues, having some of the same lived experiences, and having a depth of character not previously noticed. The experience is one that was transformative to a greater or lesser extent in each of us. Encounters with any other person have some affect on an individual, but the profound differences are in how open the individual is to the experience and in the stance each takes towards transforming with it. It was apparent through these conversations that there is much more to every student than the single dimension of presenting problems. A failed calculus test may intricately tie to culture, values, family, history, and me.

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**Appendix B**
**Interview questions**

Initial interview:

Tell me what is was like for you when you first started thinking about going to college?
What did you think college would be like?
What was college like when you got there?

Follow-up interview (summer semester):
What stands out from the interview?
What was the interaction like for us?
What are our impressions of the program?

Amended (fall semester):
(At the end of the first interview): Think of three things that stand out for you, and I will think of three things that stand out for me. We will bring them back with us and talk about them when we meet again.
(At the follow-up interview): Would you like to start, or would you like me to start?

**Fostering Professional Development and Evaluation Through Collaboration**

Betty B. Ragland
Mountain View Youth Development Center

***"If you can enjoy an evaluation, you've really done something." L.R.****

***"It has made teaching exciting again. I was in a rut and I needed to get out. I'm continuing to change; it's on-going—like a cattle prod to get me off my chair and do something better.' D.G.***

This research initiative began in desperation, though I believe it now stands on a somewhat more respectable footing. My practice is that of a teacher supervisor, or assistant principal, in a regional youth development center. My job duties include reviewing school records, scheduling students, and completing transcripts, in addition to dealing with disciplinary issues and special education concerns. Another major component of my practice is serving as a curriculum specialist, planning and delivering in-service training, and evaluating teachers. In the fall of 2001, it became apparent that, due to the resignation of the principal, I would, over the next few months, be required to complete Department of Personnel annual performance evaluations for twenty school staff members and Department of Education Frameworks for Evaluation and Professional growth for thirteen teachers. The Tennessee Frameworks is mandatory for all teachers in the first three years of their teaching careers and at set points thereafter. The Comprehensive Evaluation cycle requires extensive self evaluation, three structured observations with reflection and feedback, and teacher documentation in order for the evaluator to complete a summative report across six domains: Planning, Teaching Strategies, Assessment and Evaluation, Learning Environment, Professional Growth, and Communication. Seventeen separate indicators must be evaluated according to rubrics. To describe this process as labor-intensive is to beggar the phrase.

When I considered completing this process, not once, but thirteen times, I would gladly have traded with Hercules for any of his labors, excepting maybe the stables. Since it was unlikely that we would be able to fill the principal's position quickly, at least not quickly enough to deal with the current year's evaluations, and since retention of teacher licensure required these evaluations, it would have to be up to me. While my initial reaction was one of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the work involved, I have always believed that inherent in the evaluation process is potential for professional growth and renewed enthusiasm for teaching.

As I reflected on these circumstances and on how I might go about evaluations in ways that would be beneficial for my colleagues and survivable for me, I realized that I was engaging in reflective practice and that I had the opportunity to examine my practice more formally through action research. I chose the DATA-DATA model (Peters, 2000), because its emphasis on cycles of action and reflection forced me as a researcher to examine my assumptions, my values, and my relational responsibilities (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) within my practice.

* For reasons of confidentiality, participant initials only will be used.

**DATA-I** focuses the researcher on an exploration of her practice through a rich **D**escription of the practice and an **A**nalysis of underlying assumptions, proposed strategies, and rationale for the research. Based on information, issues, and reasons surfaced during these first two stages, the researcher formulates a practical or, as I prefer to think of it, a participant **T**heory to shape and guide the research effort. In the last stage of DATA-I, the researcher **A**cts on her theory. **DATA-II** provides for not only what is usually considered to be the matter of research, the **D**esign of the study and the **A**nalysis of results, but also leads the researcher to re-examine her **T**heory in light of the research results and literature in the field, as well as to formulate new participant theories as a basis for (**A**ction) going on in the practice.

**DESCRIBE**

Critical features differentiate the experience of being a teacher/supervisor at Mountain View Youth Development Center from that of our colleagues in community schools. We answer to three state departments—TN Department of Education, TN Department of Personnel, and TN Department of Children's Services and an accrediting agency, the American Correctional Association. In addition, approximately forty per cent of our students are served in special education; therefore federal mandates apply. As a result of settlement agreements resulting from prior lawsuits, my department (DCS) employs attorneys at the facility level for student consultation. We may indeed be in the unique position of paying people to sue us.

Our students are all adjudicated juvenile delinquents, many of whom have incurred very serious charges. Almost all of these students have experienced considerable difficulty in school. For some, previous school records consist of page after page of disciplinary offenses; for others, there are multiple placements, as many as six, within a single school year. Most students test at least two grade levels below age expectations. The average length of stay is six months, though some remain with us for years. Students come and go on a near-daily basis; the 'beginning of the term" is a meaningless concept, as we operate year around. On a slow day I can barely make out the top of my desk; sometimes it disappears for weeks at a time.

Since Mountain View is a year-round school without breaks except for state holidays, there are very limited opportunities for us to meet with other members of the teaching profession, whose schedules are very different from our own. Professional development opportunities are hard to come by, but substitute teachers are impossible to come by. Whenever any teacher takes time off, her colleagues cover her classes. There is no intercom system; when a fight breaks out, teachers simply yell for the nearest security officer. In a very real sense we function as security first and teachers second.

Moreover, we are located on a campus surrounded by a security fence topped with razor wire within buildings where no windows open, every door is locked, and simply getting to one's classroom requires passage through three electronically controlled steel doors. Because of the nature of our population, no student can ever be out of sight supervision. We have three formal "counts" during each school day, and each teacher counts her students two or three times within a class period. Vocational teachers count, and account for, not only tools, but screws and nails, tea bags, yeast, plastic bags, even pencils. A bathroom break requires summoning security to watch over the classroom.

**ANALYZE**

I have been a part of this faculty for over ten years, and a supervisor for nearly nine of those years. Perhaps because of the necessary element of maintaining security, the management of Mountain View Youth Development is based on a military model. There is an organizational chart which sets out the "lines of supervision." Security officers wear uniforms and progress through the "ranks" from CSO (Children's Services Officer) to Lieutenant. For years my Job Performance Plan has included an objective to "observe the chain of command." Decisions are made at the department level in Nashville or at the facility level in senior management meetings and passed down through middle managers and line supervisors. I am considered a middle manager, and I have observed first-hand the effects of this management strategy, which preserves the status of rank at the expense of empowerment for those who exercise direct supervision of delinquent youth.

And we function in an environment where our students claim to our faces that we are "not real teachers" and our colleagues across the institution frequently voice their resentment at the pay differential between teachers and all other job classes. The administration of the facility are not educators; there are numerous instances of local policies and/or decisions which negatively affect teachers and teaching. In a real sense we lack community with either our teacher colleagues in local school districts or our institutional colleagues.

Despite these real and critical differences, we are held to the same standards of accountability as other administrators, teachers, and students elsewhere in the state. We are an approved Special School District, our teachers and administrators must meet and maintain licensure requirements, and our students must pass all state-mandated tests. As do community schools, we struggle to find and retain qualified and committed teachers. And these teachers struggle in this environment to meet the needs of a most challenging student body. Evaluation comes to be seen as just **"another hoop to jump through"** **D.B.**

**THEORIZE**

My participation in the Collaborative Learning program at the University of Tennessee has provided impetus for rethinking my relational responsibility, "the shared attempt to sustain the conditions in which we can join in the construction of meaning and morality" (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) within this most difficult and strange environment. I have come to consider myself a kind of fifth column, to continue the military metaphor. I have engaged in strategies to foster empowerment and collaboration within the school staff for the past three years. Following Cooperider (1996 ), I had previously made use of Appreciative Inquiry to encourage teachers to articulate their expertise and commitment to teaching and supported staff members in providing in-service presentations for their colleagues. Rather than position (Davies and Harre, 2001) myself or allow others to position me as the source of all answers, I have practiced "not-knowing" in so far as possible in order to foster self-directed actions. Yet, however much I may wish to be a colleague, a mentor, and a facilitator, I have responsibilities as an evaluator and supervisor as well. Based on the success of previous efforts to create the perception of school staff as a "community of resources" (Katz & Shotter, 1999), I examined the mandatory evaluation process to determine how to involve and support

teachers in a meaningful, empowering evaluative experience that would satisfy the Tennessee Frameworks requirements.

For the 2001/02 school year, thirteen teachers were due for evaluation cycles. I held in-service activities to familiarize teachers with the Tennessee Frameworks, as this was the first year for full plan implementation. Forms were copied and provided to teachers and complete manuals and my training notes were made available to all staff members. For teachers who already have professional licensure and who demonstrate significant strengths in their professional development, there is an option, the Focused Assessment, which allows for concentration on one area of development. Teachers involved in this form of assessment must develop an action plan, evaluation methods and criteria, and expected benefits. This plan is then subject to change, amendment, or rejection by the observer. Collaborative Focused Assessments are acceptable within the Frameworks. After the initial self-assessment phase, five of the professionally licensed teachers were determined eligible for the Focused Assessment. Individual conferences confirmed their interest. I determined to seek the engagement of these five teachers in an action research project, within which they could actively seek to improve their own practices. In addition to the evaluation procedures provided by the Frameworks, we would jointly address the results of their efforts through dialogue. I wanted to discover if facilitating a collaborative action research process would result in positive changes in participants' attitudes toward evaluation, professional development and collaboration, as well as changes in instructional strategy. I believed that, given the opportunity, my colleagues would structure for themselves an experience far more meaningful for their practices than what I could provide for them.

**ACT**

I provided copies of Jarvis (1998) *The Practitioner-Researcher* in advance of our first meeting, where we discussed various kinds of knowledge, especially "practical knowledge," and affirmed that, as educators, we are continually engaged at some level in action research in our classroom. This group seemed eager to take advantage of the opportunity to examine their own professional practices and asked numerous questions about action research. I then provided an adapted version of Peters' (2000) DATA-DATA as a guideline for engaging in action research. (See Addendum ). I suggested that, as a first step, each group member reflect on the first question: What is it that I do? I also asked them to consider whether they preferred to work individually or collaboratively.

By my second meeting with the group, they had already met, talked about common interests, decided to work together collaboratively, and scheduled weekly meetings as the 'Focus Group" to that end. Several, however, had additional questions about action research, especially as it differed from more traditional forms of research. I then confessed that I had been engaged in action research projects of my own over the past two years in an attempt to foster collaboration among the faculty. I briefly recounted the steps I had followed to develop, implement, and evaluate collaborative strategies to illustrate how the process of action research might look; I also articulated my goal of creating together a "way of going on" (Wittgenstein, 1980) that will sustain and challenge us. I shared with them my strategies involving activities in School Improvement Planning, development and delivery of in-service presentations, routine management issues, and teacher evaluation during that period, as well as the fact that I

was still "experimenting." This remark was received with laughter, and one member of the group, D.G., said, "We're your guinea pigs!"

Over the next several months, I met occasionally with this group to answer questions and check on progress. They scheduled weekly meetings, which later became twice-monthly meetings and continued throughout the school year. When one group member was out on medical leave for an extended period, the group held meetings by speaker phone to keep her involved. Seventeen formal meetings have been recorded, though this number does not include more casual conversations or dialogues which occurred spontaneously between two or more group members. In the spring of 2002, I approached this group to determine if they would be interested in training to observe and script (record detailed notes on) instructional presentations by their colleagues. When all five members indicated enthusiasm, I provided the training. Three group members subsequently observed classes for their colleagues.

**DESIGN**

Data was collected from written reflections generated by the modified DATA-DATA guideline, dialogues with the entire group and with individual members, and observations and conversations noted throughout the school year. In September and October of 2002, I scheduled individual interviews with each participant, utilizing a series of structured questions (see Addendum III) to explore various aspects of the experience. These interviews are the primary source for data; each participant read and evaluated the transcription for accuracy. For teachers who also observed their colleagues, the Appraisal Conference which followed each observation was an additional source of information. This data was analyzed across interviews for experiential similarity (Pollio, et. al., 1997). Suspending in so far as possible my own assumptions, I returned to the participants with this data for their verification or correction. Only those themes which occurred in at least four of the five transcriptions were utilized. These themes are recorded in the participants' words. In addition, a metaphorical analysis was performed on the transcripts of the interviews, and observations of participant actions are noted.

**ANALYSIS (RESULTS)**

Six common themes emerged from this data analysis: Discovery/Reminders, Isolation/Team Member, Vulnerability/Hope(Help), Problems/Support, Colleagues/Community of Resources, Self-Image.

**Discovery/Reminders**

This theme was expressed in both the sense of discovering something new and of being reminded of what a participant had already or once known. R.K. described observing his colleagues as **"an eye-opening experience"** which gave him a **"new respect for how good some of my fellow teachers can be."** L.R. reflected that **"You find out a lot about yourself and fellow teachers. You can step back and look at who you are, where you want to go, what you want to achieve. You ask different questions."** Several comments mentioned being surprised. In commenting on observing a colleague, L.N. spoke of a **"surprising sense of common purpose."** L.R. stated, **"I was shocked! I thought (observing teachers) was just something that had to be done. I thought it was just busy work. But I enjoyed it, and I appreciated the opportunity."** Others experienced a rediscovery or a reminder of what they had known: **"I've learned some things about me....I'm impatient. I knew that, but this**

**reminded me"** (D.G.). For D.B., **"It reminded me of what I intended to do when I first started teaching and have drifted away from."** And one comment seemed to indicate that a participant was continuing to examine the role of expectations: **"Did I just expect it or was it really happening?"** (L.N.)

**Isolation/Team Member**

Four of the five Focus Group members spend much of their working day outside the Core Building away from the majority of the school staff. Therefore, it may be expected that isolation might emerge as a theme. However, the isolation alluded to in the comments of participants seemed to encompass more than physical removal from other teachers, which for some is not necessarily experienced as a negative. According to D.G., **"We're isolated. It's a pleasurable sort of isolation—a good thing. But meeting with others gives us a different perspective on what we do. I think of us as a 'Faculty of Five'; it's a different feeling. We're special—hard workers, too."** But for D.B., **"Working in isolation can be depressing and scary. You don't have feedback and encouragement. Also being able to pick up a tool or two from other teachers. Just some of the resources other teachers have are useful...I haven't been aware of (that) before."** Participants contrasted the solitary practitioner with the team member. L.R. said, **"You can work with someone everyday and not know them. I didn't know them (other group members) until the group; we have a tendency to have our own little world—our territory."** And for R.K., **"That's the thing about the Focused Group; we were all spokes in a wheel, cogs in a gear...You don't want to be the "weak sister." You want respect from your co-workers, whom you respect."**

**Vulnerability/Hope(Help)**

The theme of vulnerability and the need for keeping up an appearance of competency also emerged, as participants were able to acknowledge their need for positive support: **"We are embarrassed to ask for help—like we've failed. We ought to know everything and we don't. The difference is now it's OK to ask for help"** (D.G.). For L.R., **"People let their guards down; it's OK. We're not scared to do this anymore. The Focus Group gave us permission to be human. Seeing people as humans, not just teachers—it is intimate."** D.B. described the experience as **"foster(ing) hope that we would be able to accomplish some of our goals. The Focus Group seemed confident enough that it allayed some of my doubts."** Another participant stated, **"I feel more confident in what I am doing," having "seen things that don't and things that do work—seen things that other people have done"** (L.N.)

**Colleagues/Community of Resources**

This experience has **"broadened my view of teaching....Because of the collaboration with other teachers, listening to how they would take an approach and apply it to a problem. Maybe I could do or adapt that"** (R.K.). **"To hear somebody say, 'This is hard. I can't do this.' I was struggling with things too. Everybody else was having the same difficulty. I wasn't alone. Not struggling with something I couldn't figure out. It made me feel good that I could and they could help me"**(D.G.). For D.B. **"We share more problems and also they express the attitude of willingness to help. They express the attitude that they see me as a resource also."** L.N. had a similar experience: **"They encouraged me to take steps....Asking questions: What are you doing? Seeing if I might apply some of the same strategies**

**has been helpful. I've never done a lot of that before, but now I'm realizing that we are all struggling on some level."**

**Self-Image**

Participants revealed that they now have a more positive experience of themselves and their practices: **"It's brought me back to caring more about it (teaching) and looking more critically at myself and how I teach. When you first start out, you're creating lesson plans; you think about it....I need to be brought back to 'You are a *professional* with a degree and a professional license. You need to act accordingly"**(R.K.). For L.R. **"I've got a different perspective on my teaching profession. It's made me appreciate it even more."** L.N. declares, **"It let me know how I truly care about the learning process and led me to explore how to make it better for me and my students."** And for D.B., **"Honestly, it makes me feel fortunate to be in a unique situation.....It has made me feel more a part of a team. It has communicated to me that I'm valued and I feel less isolated."**

**METAPHORIC ANALYSIS**

In addition to thematizing the participant interviews, I examined the transcripts for the use of language, particularly metaphor. "Metaphors provide perspectives that define how we construe meaning....Because of their capacity to persuade, seduce, and socialize us to their selected perspectives, metaphors deserve primary consideration in any learning process that attempts to assist us in critical reflection....Through the analysis of metaphors ... we can examine and validate those perspectives that have had the most influence on our personal meanings"(Deshler, 1990, p. 310). Metaphorical analysis revealed two major motifs, as well as some interesting sidelights. One participant, who described himself as "analytical", used metaphors which bore out the accuracy of that assessment: subject matter was referred to as "nuts and bolts" and members of the Focus Group were described as "spokes in a wheel/cogs in a gear" (R.K.)

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) "are concerned primarily with how people understand their experiences. We view language as providing data that can lead to general principles of understanding . The general principles involve whole systems of concepts rather than individual words or individual concepts" (p. 116). The first major motif revealed that WORK IS A JOURNEY, in this case a journey which had bogged down. Images of stalled progress characterize the beginning of this journey. Three participants spoke of having been in a "rut" and needing to get out. Another described this experience as "like walking into a dark room and trying to find the best way out" and also of "standing on my island." Yet another suggested that I might have provided more guidance at first because "we needed confirmation we were on the right track." Significantly, this language is used to describe the beginning of the process.

The most significant use of metaphor, in terms of number of occurrences, is that of UNDERSTANDING (KNOWING) IS SEEING. Four of the five participants expressed concern about how they might be characterized by others: "see me as frivolous," "appearance to an outside observer," "hope they see me as actually teaching," and "perception that I was an intruder." Examination of one's practice was "having a look at how and why I do (things)," "see(ing) results," "helpful insights." Being aware of colleagues' teaching practices was "an eye-opening experience.' The action research gave three participants a "different perspective" because it "requires me to look at me."

Both the "need (for) the perspective of others" and "see(ing) me as a resource also" were noted.

**OBSERVATIONS**

As additional data, I noted during this timeframe actions of these five teachers which support these findings. L.N. took the initiative to schedule an in-service for colleagues who were having difficulty with some of the Frameworks Comprehensive Assessment paperwork. He researched the requirements and scheduled a meeting to coach these teachers. L.R. initiated collaborations with a science and an English teacher to secure their participation in preparing GED students for the new 2002 GED test. R.K. attended a special education training session and brought back information which he then shared with the entire faculty. D.G. consulted with a colleague who was struggling with discipline problems. All five teachers volunteered to script observations for their colleagues in order to meet Frameworks requirements. It is not unusual for any of these teachers to ask me, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

**THEORIZE**

From this action research I learned, or perhaps rediscovered, that the experience of my colleagues prior to this initiative was one of feeling isolated and bogged down in routine. My observations, my analysis, and their assessments are congruent in suggesting that this process has been one of discovery and renewal, of action and reflection, of pride and dedication, and of coming to see themselves and their colleagues as a "community of resources"(Katz & Shotter, 1999). My action research initiative was to study action research. My research questions were whether facilitating collaborative action research would foster positive changes in participant attitudes toward evaluation, professional development and collaboration, and changes in instructional strategy. I asked the wrong, or at least the lesser, questions. The questions which have been answered are whether a group of people can re-imagine themselves and their work, whether they can construct for themselves a way of going on that is mutually supportive and contributes to professional development and human flourishing. The answer is "Yes."

**ACTION**

This research initiative ends where all such initiatives end; at the beginning of another cycle. Looking at where we are now, I find that the results of this research initiative confirm what Marshall and Reason (1994) have identified as the aims of action research:

> All good research is *for me, for us*, and *for them*: It speaks to three audiences...It is *for them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes...It is *for us* to the extent that it responds to concerns for our praxis, is relevant and timely...(for) those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is *for me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world (112-113).

My colleagues have recommended that we incorporate action research initiatives in other areas and include other staff members. They have pointed out ways in which I might improve my facilitation of action research, chiefly in providing more support in the early stages. And so we begin again.

## IMPLICATIONS

While there are unusual characteristics of our professional practice, it may well be that those are differences of degree rather than kind. Facilitating collaborative action research is a potential answer for renewed enthusiasm and improved practice.

*The Focus Group will always be a resource for me....I don't hesitate to go to (other teachers) now; I wouldn't have done that before the Focus Group. I'm not standing there on my island; I have others to accompany me. It was a great experience and it didn't matter how hard we worked—that's a minor detail.*
*L.R..*

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Appendix A

FOCUS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1 **Tell me about your Action Research.**

2 **Why did you decide to do this?**

3 **What impact does this have on your practice?**

4 **How is this process like or different from other evaluation procedures?**

5 **How would you describe your attitude toward Action Research?**

6 **How would you describe your participation in the Focus Group?**

7 **What did you learn from observing your colleagues?**

8 **Have you made any changes in your own practice as a result?**

9 **What stands out for you from the Reflecting Conversations?**

10 **How has this experience affected your attitude toward evaluations?**

11 **Has this experience involved reflection on your values?**

12 **Would you recommend action research and/or observing colleagues for other teacher**

13 **What questions remain?**

**Appendix B**

**DESCRIBE YOUR PRACTICE**

**What is it that I do?**
**What makes my practice unique?**
**In what area do I want to grow?**

**ANALYZE THE PROBLEM**

**What do I want to find out?**
**Why do I want to do this?**
**What are some possible benefits to me and my students?**
**What is my role in this?**

**THEORIZE: STRATEGY AND PLANS**

**What will I do?**
**How does this fit in with my targeted area for growth?**
**Why do I think this plan will work?**
**What problems do I face?**
**What impact will my taking this action have on others/other areas?**

## 14 ACT I

**DELIBERATE**

**How has this plan of action functioned to**

1) **help me find out what I want to know?**
2) **Address my targeted area of growth**
3) **Effect greater learning for my students?**

**ANALYZE THE RESULTS**

**Taking into consideration your preliminary action plan, ask these questions:**

**What data will I need to collect to establish the effectiveness of my plan?**

**What will be the criteria for assessing this data?**

### *14.1 THEORIZE*

**What actions on my part might give better results?**
**What are some possible alternative strategies?**
**What am I learning by doing?**
**What am I learning by dialoguing with others?**

## 15 ACT II

**(BASED ON NEW UNDERSTANDING**

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**Telephone:** 301-552-4200
**Toll Free:** 800-799-3742
**FAX:** 301-552-4700
**e-mail:** info@ericfac.piccard.csc.com
**WWW:** http://ericfacility.org

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